DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 341 982 CS 213 137

AUTHOR Alexander, Jayne
TITLE Restructuring the Ninth Grade English Class To Improve Student Achievement.
PUB DATE 91
NOTE 58p.; Ed.D. Practicum, Nova University.
PUB TYPE Dissertations/Theses - Practicum Papers (043)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC03 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Achievement; *English Instruction; Grade 9; *High School Freshmen; High Schools; Instructional Improvement; Instructional Innovation; *Student Attitudes; Teacher Student Relationship
IDENTIFIERS New Hampshire

ABSTRACT

The practicum described in this report aimed to improve student achievement in a ninth-grade English class in New Hampshire by restructuring the program so that students felt more involved in the course content, delivery, and process. Students in three sections of ninth-grade English who were identified in eighth grade as stable, high achievers, performed erratically and at a lower level of achievement in their ninth-grade English class. Numerous changes in teaching style, course content, and learning activities were implemented. The teacher established communication lines with incoming ninth-grade students, redefined herself as a facilitator of learning, and developed appropriate group activities that focused on students as individuals who needed to feel fulfilled, important, and in control of learning they would view as meaningful. Results showed that students improved their level of academic achievement in the ninth-grade English class by meeting deadlines, attending class regularly, coming to class prepared, and participating in class activities in a meaningful and attentive manner. (Twenty-seven references and an appendix containing the freshman adjustment questionnaire are attached.) (Author/SR)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED341982

Restructuring the Ninth Grade English Class to Improve Student Achievement

RECEIVED
JAN 06 1992
ERIC

by

Jayne Alexander

Cluster 43

A Practicum I Report presented to the
Ed.D. Program in Child and Youth Studies
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

NOVA UNIVERSITY
1991

CS213137

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Alexander

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

PRACTICUM APPROVAL SHEET

This practicum took place as described.

Verifier: Barbara L. Tremblay

Barbara Tremblay

Keene High School Administrator

Keene, NH

December 9, 1991

This practicum report was submitted by Jayne Alexander under the direction of the adviser listed below. It was submitted to the Ed.D. Program in Child and Youth Studies and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Nova University.

Approved:

Dec. 20, 1991
Date of Final Approval of Report

Wm. W. Anderson
William W. Anderson, Ed.D.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I would like to thank the following people for their invaluable support, encouragement, and guidance and publicly acknowledge their genuine concern for the well being of all students: Dr. William W. Anderson, Deborah Swartout.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

		Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENT		iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS		iv
ABSTRACT		vi
Chapter		
I	INTRODUCTION	1
	Description of Work Setting and community	2
	Writer's Work Setting and Role	4
II	STUDY OF THE PROBLEM	6
	Problem Description	6
	Problem Documentation	7
	Causative Analysis	9
	Relationship of the Problem to the Literature	11
III	ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES AND EVALUATION INSTRUMENTS	15
	Goals and Expectations	15
	Expected Outcomes and Evaluation Instruments	15
IV	SOLUTION STRATEGY	17
	Discussion and Evaluation of Solutions	17
	Description of Selected Solution	27
	Report of Action Taken	28

V RESULTS, DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS... 35

Results..... 35
Discussion..... 38
Dissemination..... 46

REFERENCES..... 47

Appendices

A FRESHMAN ADJUSTMENT QUESTIONNAIRE..... 51

ABSTRACT

Restructuring the Ninth Grade English Class to Improve Student Achievement. Alexander, Jayne., 1991: Practicum Report, Nova University, Ed.D. Program in Child and Youth Studies. Descriptors /High School Freshmen/Cooperative Education/English Curriculum/Transitional Programs/

This practicum was designed to improve student achievement in the ninth grade English class. Ninth grade students, previously identified in eighth grade as stable, high achievers, performed erratically and at a lower level of achievement in their ninth grade English class. The goal of the writer was to effect an appreciable improvement in student achievement in her ninth grade English classes by restructuring the program so that students would feel more invested in the course content, delivery, and process.

The writer implemented numerous changes in teaching style, course content, and learning activities. She established communication lines with incoming ninth grade students, she redefined herself as a facilitator of learning, and she developed appropriate group activities that focused on students as individuals who needed to feel fulfilled, important, and in control of learning they would view as meaningful.

The writer has determined that expected outcomes were reached. Students did improve their level of academic achievement in the ninth grade English class by meeting deadlines, attending class regularly, arriving to class prepared, and participating in class activities in a meaningful and attentive manner.

****

As a student in the Ed.D. Program in Child and Youth Studies, I do give my permission to Nova University to distribute copies of this practicum report on request from interested individuals. It is my understanding that Nova University will not charge for this dissemination except to cover the costs of microfiching, handling, and mailing of the materials.

December 10, 1991

Jayne Alexander
Jayne Alexander

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Description of Community

The work setting for the writer is a regional high school in a growing New England community in the southwestern corner of New Hampshire. Like many other New England communities, this one also has felt its growing pains. No longer is it an idyllic New England village of rural folk who rely on the land for their subsistence. The village has grown into a city; its farm land has been paved for industrial development while its country homes have been remodeled for multi-family dwelling.

This community's growing population of 22,100 is no longer homogeneous, stable, or self sufficient. Of this total population approximately 50 are Asian, 10 are Native American, 30 are Hispanic, and 35 are Black (Non-Hispanic). Because this community consistently boasts the lowest unemployment rate in the state, many individuals migrate here to find work and leave when the job market in their field becomes unstable. There are only two full-time farms left in the area. This city is now officially described as industrial, housing 55 factories and 4 industrial parks. It also has become the retail and social service center for more than 100,000 people residing within a 20 square mile radius. These social services are an integral part of the lives of many; the median household income is $16,462, leaving 10.2% of the population to survive below the poverty level. Hence,

the needs and values of this population are alive and emergent, impacting its institutions by calling for their reevaluation and redefinition.

Description of the Work Setting

The high school that serves this population houses 1,369 students, 668 males and 701 females, in grades nine to twelve. Presently attending the high school are six Native Americans, seven Asians, twelve Hispanics, and four Black, Non-Hispanics. A significant portion (15%) of the student population is tuitioned (at a rate of $4,450 per student) to this high school by five, smaller outlying towns that have generally, by their geographical isolation, kept their rural homogeneity. In other words, they come to this community to attend school, to shop, and to work; but their value system remains firmly entrenched in their own community.

Students at this school choose from over 250 academic and vocational offerings. In major academic disciplines students are tracked in a sophisticated leveling system: one (honors), two (college preparatory), three (general), four (below sixth grade reading skills), remedial (special education), and collaborative (learning disabled). Presently 10 percent of the student population leaves school before graduation requirements are met; 64 percent pursue post-secondary education.

The school is staffed by 110 full-time faculty members, yielding an average ratio of one teacher to sixteen students. However, academic English classes (levels one and two) average 25 students per class. The particular target group for this project consists of two sections of level one, ninth grade English classes, having 28 and 27 students in each

group and one section of level two, having 24 students. In the level one sections there are seven and five more girls in each class; in the level two class the gender split is even.

The level one college bound classes are very homogeneous in nature. With the exception of only a few, students in this group score above grade level on the Gates MacGinitie Reading Test. All students in these classes are Caucasian; many have never had an occasion to or are unaware that they have ever communicated with a non-white individual. Very few students actively participate in any religious group, and those who do are mostly Christians who seem unaware of their connections to other's beliefs. All but ten students have parents who hold advanced degrees. With the exception of only eight students, they all live in the same neighborhood and therefore attended the same elementary and middle school. Their values and relationships are well rooted in their school beginnings nine years ago. On the other hand, the level two section is more heterogeneous. Students in this level would like to be college bound or have been urged by teachers and/or parents to set a post-secondary education goal. All students in this group are white; but socio-economically they are quite diverse with an average representation from all levels. However, student ethnicity is rarely identified; most have no connection to a religious or ethnic group and are fairly narrow in their understanding of either type of affiliation. Students in this group have no geographical focus; thirteen students are from outlying towns. Hence, these students usually do not enter high school with solidified group dynamics and predetermined expectations of one another. They present themselves as 24 individuals.

Writer's Work Setting

The writer is the English teacher of this target group. She is one of 110 full-time faculty persons in a department of 14 teaching professionals. She has been an educator for 20 years, 14 of which represent teaching experience at the high school level in the discipline of English, the past six years at this particular high school. With the exception of one teacher, all members of this English department have more than ten years of teaching experience; many have spent their entire professional careers at this high school. Of the 14 department members ten hold advanced degrees. The writer is one of only two to have completed post baccalaureate study within the past five years and one of only three to have changed teaching posts within the last six years.

Writer's Role

The writer completed a master of arts degree for teachers of English in 1989 and is presently enrolled in a doctoral program of child and youth studies. Academic course work continues to challenge and refresh the writer who often feels frustrated by the sedentary outlook and unresponsive nature of peers settled into seemingly fixed patterns and roles. Previous attempts by the writer to respond to the diverse voices remaining silent in today's classrooms and their need to picture their education as a puzzle whose pieces *do* fit together have been haphazard; evaluation of these attempts was informal; and such efforts were generally unsupported by department consensus. However, enough evidence, coupled with occasional student and parent feedback validating the writer's efforts, gives the writer a "sense" that a restructuring of her program would be valid

and beneficial. Prepared to close the door "when it gets too noisy;" give herself permission to wander off the "historically beaten path of instruction;" and to respond articulately to skeptics, she embarks on this project with a genuine, good feeling that she is about to become a member of an exciting learning team.

CHAPTER II

STUDY OF THE PROBLEM

Problem Description

Ninth grade students, previously identified in eighth grade as stable, high achievers, performed erratically and at a lower level of achievement in their ninth grade English class. These ninth grade students frequently forgot deadlines and instructional materials, took unfocused notes, displayed short attention spans, and missed school. However, when roped in by teachers and parents, students usually responded positively, disciplining themselves for a brief amount of time. But this renewed commitment was fragile, often breaking in the sight of more important personal and social demands. The immaturity of ninth grade students was often the excuse offered by professionals for their hit or miss approach to academic work, but these educators had spent little time with ninth grade students, had not spoken to their eighth grade teachers, and had based their explanations on supposition and stereotype, not on personal experience. However, teachers of ninth grade students often get glimpses of serious, perceptive learners. The challenge was to sustain and validate this more mature and responsible attitude when it surfaced. To summarize, these ninth grade students were generally disconnected and detached from their English course work.

Problem Documentation

Evidence of this problem was supported by school records, conferences, questionnaires, interviews, and journal entries.

The most striking evidence supporting this problem was housed in the students' grade records. Grade records of three similarly grouped sections of 83 ninth grade students (academic year 1990 - 1991) indicated that when compared to their eighth grade (academic year 1989 - 1990) performance in English class, 23 dropped 10 or more points during the first quarter. In terms of letter grades, this would represent a drop of one full letter grade.

Attendance records (academic year 1990 - 1991) identified irregular school attendance as a problem associated with these ninth grade students. The school reported an average of six days absent per academic year for students who were not labeled "at risk" and who were predicted to complete graduation requirements. School wide, ninth grade students averaged eight days absent per academic year.

The 1990 - 1991 discipline referral records of these ninth grade classes noted that nine of a total of ten incidents requiring administrative discipline stemmed from student inattention and subsequent disruptive behavior. In other words, student misbehavior that required action more serious than a verbal warning or reprimand by the teacher was often the result of a student's disinterest in the topic or activity.

Parents of these ninth grade students were generally involved with their child's school experience. Conferences were scheduled regularly with parents of students who were having social or academic difficulty. These conferences

revealed similar frustrations shared by parent and teacher. Students often neglected to bring home their school work and showed little interest in discussing course work or academic achievement with their inquiring families.

In questionnaires (see Appendix A) completed by these 83 students, 62 characterized themselves as lost in an overwhelming system that seemed to have little to do with their personal needs and goals and vastly different from their previous experience as eighth graders in a middle or elementary school. Specifically students felt intimidated by a sprawling building of one-quarter mile hallways and a schedule that dictated efficient travel throughout the entire building. Most classes were conducted in a lecture format; expectations for academic performance and class room behavior differed for each class. Students felt fragmented by their schedules and course requirements. Socially, students were unprepared for the pressures and choices they were immediately assaulted by. Students, over 300 of whom were approaching 18 years of age, seemed "old" to these fresh teens. Girls reported the fact that boys had beards and moustaches and approached them as men would women. Finally, more than 50 students noted that interested and understanding teachers and coaches were most responsible for their adjustment.

Four English teachers of ninth grade students interviewed by the writer reported similar frustrations with ninth grade student performance. They all noted that students were generally unable to develop ideas beyond superficial mention, that students frequently turned in late work that was carelessly prepared and below the teacher's expectation, and that students repeated the same errors over again. All teachers expressed concern for the students' need to feel socially acceptable yet independent and uniquely themselves. One teacher summed up the feelings of the four

respondents by describing his ninth grade students as "riding a social roller coaster which let them off for only brief encounters with serious academic activity."

Finally, the writer's journal supported the responses of these English teachers of ninth grade students. It recorded observations of students who were often disinterested in course content and distracted by social concerns. The typical student arrived to class in the midst of a chaos of scattered conversation (that hinted of giggles, tears, disappointment and anger), note passing, and last minute farewells to friends traveling to another destination. To call the class to attention, detaching them from their social focus, was often time consuming and frustratingly repetitious. Journal comments reflected the writer's sense that students were participating in class and completing required tasks because they had been taught they had no choice. In other words, this is what being a teenager was all about. You went to school; you followed the rules; and your parents permitted you certain privileges outside of school. And, upon graduation you finally got to do what "really counts."

Causative Analysis

It was the writer's belief that there were two major causes for the stated problem. These ninth grade students were unassisted in their transition from eighth to ninth grade, from a middle or elementary school concept to a high school concept. Freshmen entering this high school came from three types of school situations. Some had attended the city's middle school which educates 790 students in grades six through eight. Curriculum development, teacher training, and scheduling reflects a commitment to the middle school concept designed for team teaching students in clusters that

participate in cooperative learning activities. Others had attended elementary schools in the outlying towns serving between 45 and 355 students in grades kindergarten (optional in some systems) through eighth. Still others had attended private schools, i.e. Montessori, Waldorf, Roman Catholic, and fundamentalist Christian in philosophy. There was no standardized approach to instruction, curriculum, or scheduling. Prior to school's opening incoming ninth grade students were given a half hour student tour of the high school building. Guidance counselors prepared entering student schedules at the elementary and middle school sites. No other introduction to this high school was offered to these students until they walked in the door the day after Labor Day and struggled to cope with over 1000 other older, more confident, and often callous students.

Secondly, the content, focus, and delivery of the ninth grade English curriculum did not fulfill the students' needs to develop and validate independent voices, to form relationships, and to merge course content with their lives. The content of the curriculum focused on ancient material, regarded by scholars as "classic," and an intense, isolated study of traditional grammar. Little time was left to examine contemporary works and to participate in enrichment activities. The skills continuum focused on the acquisition of knowledge easily measured by standardized tests. The student's ability to think critically, to interact with confidence, and to contribute responsibly and honestly were left to evolve from the academic tasks required by the curriculum. Finally, traditional teacher - centered delivery was the norm. Class sizes, room design, available materials, and administrative leadership encouraged this strategy. It was a strategy that employed lecture 90 percent of the time and by default invalidated most voices in the room.

Students were left feeling isolated, out of control, and impersonalized by this situation.

Relationship of the Problem to the Literature

A review of the literature provides evidence that sinking student achievement in academic courses is a significant issue worthy of study and initiative. Barth (1990) estimates that less than 15 percent of the student population makes more than a casual attempt to achieve. "Today almost none of our students are doing high - quality work in their regular academic classes" (Barth, 1990, p. 426). Performance in English, a core requirement for all students, follows this pattern of seemingly acceptable and chronic mediocrity. The disease is pervasive, affecting all facets of the English curriculum.

The study of composition is particularly plagued by ineptitude. Kearns (1991) speaks of living in a "house of correction" (p. 62), defining herself as one who "assigns, waits, then hunts for red October" (p. 62). She identifies the growing problem of student disinterest and irresponsibility with regard to their written pieces. She recognizes the importance of nurturing students who are eager and confident to assume ownership for each step in the writing process from topic selection to publication. Honig (1989) identifies further areas of deficiency in the writing class. He describes students who are often anxious about putting their ideas on paper in view of a reader or unmotivated, lacking anything important to say. When students do write, he notes their inability to write "fluently, coherently, and correctly, and with economy of expression" (1989, p. 2) using a variety of writing strategies. Perhaps more important than any of the

aforementioned is Honig's (1989) reminder that students do not seem to enjoy writing.

Other literature examines the dysfunctional literature class where students seem unable to relate to scholarly works deemed important for their academic consumption. Schaffer (1989) bemoans the fact that only a "handful" (p. 40) of students participate and merely do so to please the teacher with a response that will further solidify the clearly identified opinions of the instructor. Few students respond honestly and personally, indicating a lack of connection to the piece under discussion. Spencer (1989) concurs with Schaffer (1989). Even students enrolled in her advanced placement course approach the discussion of a classic as a chore, another meaningless requirement conceived by a distant scholar living in a world far removed from their own.

In their study (1990) Sansone and Baker discuss the problem of poor freshman attendance and its impact on student achievement and graduation. They note that students who have difficulty completing ninth grade often drop out of school before graduation requirements are met. These ninth grade students, often troubled by transition, choose truancy which generally results in academic failure. The pattern stubbornly repeats itself in subsequent years until the student can legally drop out of school. If students are not in school, it doesn't matter how relevant, individualized, or exciting the academic program may be. They are not there; they remain isolated, alone in their choice to reject or shy away from the social system we call "school" and consequently, fail. In other words, it becomes critical to get young people to school and to assist them with their integration.

The literature reveals several causes for the identified problem. MacIver (1990) argues that poor academic achievement in ninth grade is largely due to an adjustment

problem. Students are distracted by social demands that threaten their self definitions. He describes the typical ninth grade school program as a "debilitating mismatch between school program and adolescent developmental needs" (p. 458). Glasser (1986) argues that student achievement is low because the structure, strategies, and focus of the classroom make the student feel unimportant and out of control and fail to meet basic human needs. Students feel unsatisfied and no longer participate in class room activities with any real purpose, thus negating any possibility of meaningful learning. Svinicki and Dixon (1987) claim that student achievement drops when teachers focus on the content and not on the methodology. Learning as a scientific process is overlooked by the lecturer who has adequately covered the material -- in other words taught the information. It becomes the student's problem to learn it. More specifically associated with the English class is Nelson's (1991) argument that poor student achievement in the English class is largely due to a student's inability to articulate thought. Nelson postulates that an overexposure to a desensitized language is most responsible for this skill deficiency. She writes:

> Our students' lives are polluted with words -- loud, cheap, manipulating, heartless words. They awaken to disc jockeys shouting time, temperature, and traffic conditions at them on their clock radios. On the school bus, ubiquitous headset radios blare mostly mindless lyrics as the students roll past the garish language of billboards and marquees. (p. 16)

This condition is probably the most insidious of all, pervading the students' lives. In summary, the literature

calls for a restructuring to meet students' needs and a reexamination of contemporary language in its multimedia communication network.

CHAPTER III

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES AND EVALUATION INSTRUMENTS

Goals and Expectations

The following goals and outcomes were projected for this practicum.

The goal of the writer is to effect an appreciable improvement in student achievement in her ninth grade English classes. In order to realize this goal students will have to feel connected to the course content, delivery, and process. Those who do will take responsibility for the quality of their work and strive for a higher level of achievement. Practically speaking, students will consistently meet deadlines, attend class regularly, arrive to class with the necessary instructionalmaterials and tools, and participate in a meaningful and attentive manner.

Expected Outcomes and Evaluation Instruments

Expected outcomes have been developed as tools to measure improvement in student achievement in these ninth grade English classes.

1. When compared to their eighth grade scores (academic year 1990 - 1991), first quarter grade records of three ninth grade sections of English (academic year 1991 - 1992), will indicate that 68 of the 79 students enrolled in these sections will have improved their grade or remained at the same level.

2. The average student absence rate per quarter will not drop below the school's quarterly average for absence, 1.5 days.

3. Discipline referrals for disruptive behavior will decrease by one third or more from the previous three ninth grade sections (1990 -1991) taught by the writer.

4. Students' positive experiences in ninth grade English will be reflected by greater quantity and quality of parents' comments as recorded in the writer's journal and as compared to her journal entries for a corresponding period from the previous year.

5. Questionnaires (see Appendix A) completed after first quarter (1991 -1992) by these 79 ninth grade students will indicate that a majority feel fulfilled and supported.

6. Journal entries made by the writer will indicate a change in student attitude that reflects an involvement with the course work.

7. By examining the number and quality of completed assignments during the last two weeks of the first quarter compared to the first two weeks the writer will note some degree of improvement in both quality of work and responsibility demonstrated by each student. Records will specifically reflect completion of assignment, timely submission, and quality of work on a scale of "yes," "sort of," and "no."

CHAPTER IV

SOLUTION STRATEGY

Discussion and Evaluation of Solutions

Ninth grade students in the writer's English classes were disconnected from their English course work and consequently performed erratically and at a lower level of achievement than they did in eighth grade. Professionals in both education and psychology offer numerous possible approaches to the problem that would, according to their findings, positively impact student achievement in these ninth grade English classes.

Psychologists affirm the critical needs of students in transition. Rosa and Vowels (1988) and MacIver (1990) describe programs they have developed to assist incoming ninth grade students with their adjustment to high school.

Rosa and Vowels (1988) propose a sharing session scheduled in
August and attended by eighth and ninth grade teachers. From this session a directory is generated that encourages and facilitates communication throughout the year. In addition they suggest ways to establish "reliable informants" (p. 58) for incoming ninth grade students by implementing a writing/buddy system, a CHAT (Come Have a Talk) program, and a school visitation and reunion program.

MacIver (1990) also notes the significance of transition. "There is clearly a risk that these simultaneous

adaptational challenges will overwhelm the coping skills of some students and have pathogenic effects on their psychological adjustment, self esteem, and motivation to learn" (p. 462). MacIver describes how advisory groups, interdisciplinary teaching teams, and school transition programs assist students in transition. Advisory groups provide students with adults who support them in their search for independence. They also help to reduce feelings of "anonymity and alienation" (p. 459). Interdisciplinary teaching teams provide students with a smaller, more personal, meaningful, and individualized learning situation. Transition programs could include buddy programs, summer meetings prior to transition, and actual school attendance for incoming students. MacIver concludes that implementation of these programs will positively impact adolescent school success.

Recognizing the importance of positive beginnings, the writer prioritized the need for addressing transition. In particular she recognized the feasibility and potential, positive impact of sharing sessions, letter exchanges, and summer meetings. Other suggestions, although perhaps valid, were not within the writer's present responsibility to implement.

The positive impact of cooperative learning is discussed by numerous authors. Glasser (1986), Barth (1990), and Slavin (1987) describe the value of cooperative learning in meeting students' needs to improve student achievement. Easley (1988) and Moberg (1989) explain how cooperative learning can be used to improve student response to literature. And Copeland and Lomax (1988) explain how cooperative learning can be used to improve student writing.

Glasser (1986) argues that a student's need to belong, to feel powerful (as a member of a successful athletic team

does), to experience a sense of freedom in determining the course of events, and to have fun are all met by membership in a learning team. He argues that satisfied students who feel in control see meaning in learning and take responsibility for it.

Barth (1990) also emphasizes the importance of student empowerment. He recommends cooperative learning as an effective model to significantly raise student achievement by effecting a "lead-management" (p. 431) setting that challenges the group to address problems, generate solutions, and evaluate the products and processes they have created.

Slavin (1987) reports that there is now evidence that supports group learning for all students. These benefits are not limited to social growth but extend to include content mastery, more highly developed critical and creative thought, and overall improved student achievement. In such a model the teacher serves as a facilitator. Slavin describes a cooperative learning situation where students are grouped heterogeneously in small sets of four that cooperate to complete appropriate learning tasks. Not only are these group members expected to complete the task and master the material, but they are encouraged and motivated to teach each other by sharing their ideas and skills with one another and by providing each other with individual attention, assistance and support. Finally, Slavin explains the function of individual and group goals and a reward system for the "sum performance" (p. 10) of all group members.

Easley (1988) seeks to provide more meaningful interaction with literature for students. He chooses the term "interact" carefully, rejecting the traditional "study." His design shifts the focus from product to process and encourages active participation and critical thinking. Prior to administering a literature essay test, the teacher divides the class into groups and advises students that he is

distributing the actual test questions plus three additional ones. The teacher then serves as coach, circulating around the room to encourage critical thought and idea exchange. He finds that students actively engaging with the literature, generating answers equal in value to those of the teacher, critically examining posed answers, and validating their classmates' responses.

Moberg (1989) assigns the study of a different poem, short story, or play to each group. Individually, students record their responses to the reading, to the worksheets, and to the group discussions in journals that are organized for double entry. The left side is reserved for concise, neutral summaries and objective responses. The right side is reserved for free writing, an opportunity for students to engage with the text on a personal level. The study of the piece then moves through focused group discussions to a presentation of the work to the entire class. Essay exams are open journal and open book; quotes from both are required. Moberg notes that his students became better critical thinkers, speakers, and writers. Copeland and Lomax (1988) caution that merely placing students in groups and asking them to look over each other's work is not effective. They suggest that the teacher lead these writing groups through four natural stages of development: apprehension, initial success, constructive criticism, and independence. A peer sharing climate must first be established by developing non-threatening, enjoyable group activities that will foster a positive attitude to team work. During the initial success stage students are given an assignment about which they have much to say. Group members are given guides to follow to generate discussion about each piece. These questions are designed to produce neutral or positive comments. During stage three students are given a more detailed response key and a set of rules for student behavior during these

sessions. Finally, during stage four, the teacher circulates, participates, and serves merely as an additional resource person. Recognizing the need for occasional variety, the authors also describe activities that break up the workshop routine.

In the past students have reacted positively toward cooperative learning activities designed and implemented by the writer. However, Slavin's (1987) specific recommendations regarding the designing and rewarding facets of group learning seemed particularly practical and valid. They addressed the inherent problems of grading and individual and group motivation and cooperation essential to the success of the group process. Acknowledging and preserving the integrity of the individual and group, Moberg (1989) explains a program designed to generate bileveled individual contributions. Finally, the groups may be well designed, evaluated and challenged, but Copeland and Lomax's (1988) emphasis on establishing a peer climate would be a prerequisite for any group learning.

Svinicki and Dixon (1987) recommend the Experiential Learning Model (Kolb, 1984) as a framework for selecting classroom activities that will enhance and integrate learning. They challenge the instructor to carefully select learning activities based on this model which analyzes learning in terms of a four staged cycle: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, active experimentation. The authors translate Kolb's terminology into verbs that can be used by teachers to develop meaningful learning activities: experiencing, examining, explaining, and applying.

Despite sophisticated leveling systems that categorize and group students, it was clearly apparent to the writer that each student was unique and needed individual recognition. Schaffer (1989), Gillespie (1991), and Neilsen

(1991) describe activities that nurture and validate each student's independent voice.

Emerging from Schaffer's (1989) commitment to study discussion are seven practical recommendations. The author poses that discussion questions should be important to the students. Not only will responses improve, but in essence students will realize that the teacher is interested in listening to each one of them, not just to those who share the teacher's opinion. The range of answers will increase as students realize that the point is not to figure what the teacher is looking for but to express their individual voices. The author teaches her students how to write interpretative questions (which are the kind appropriate for discussion) and then uses student questions for class discussion. Next Schaffer points out the importance of an incubation period, allowing time for students to think before they are asked to respond. This provides equal opportunity to all and does not build in an advantage for those who think quickly or for those who will risk a weak but quick response in order to command the attention of the teacher. Teachers should keep records of those who speak and those who don't. Record keeping is accurate and reminds teachers of their commitment to involve all students in the discussion. Schaffer believes that students who say, "I don't know." should not be allowed to remain silent and uncommitted. She suggests the teacher pose safe questions to such students and probe until an answer is elicited, setting a basis and expectation for future response. Teachers should not ignore students whose answers are "wrong" but should, instead, kindly respond to their answers. Students whom the author polled were adamant about this. Students whose answers are dismissed without response from the teacher do not wish to risk speaking again. They feel the teacher does not care about them. They feel like non-persons. In other words,

teachers should acknowledge that students have taken the risk to participate. Schaffer recommends that teachers "watch the clock" and plan for closure that reflects on the content and nature of the discussion. According to the author each student deserves the opportunity to develop the confidence and ease to participate in discussions; the teacher should develop appropriate tasks to develop such skills in these students.

Gillespie (1991) describes a unit she designed in order for students to become the "editors of their own lives" (p. 48). Students read a memoir, autobiography, or biography. Through a series of activities they become involved with their subject and share with the class the understanding they have gleaned. After participating in numerous activities designed to energize memory, students begin to write their own memoirs. Gillespie notes not only an improvement in student writing but the feeling by students that they as individuals have been validated. During subsequent activities Gillespie reports that students are more eager, honest, and perceptive when responding.

Neilsen (1991) suggests an approach for discussion leaders that encourages the detached, objective voice and the voice that cares and needs to be cared about (or listened to). First, the seemingly small victories experienced by the private person should be acknowledged and not overlooked only because they did not impose them or call attention to them. Secondly, teachers must allow themselves to reach beyond content focus to place more attention on cooperation and collaboration and individual well being of students. Finally, teachers must understand the importance of and create situations that develop "rational" and "cultural" bonds among group members. Neilsen says that being listened to should move from a "wish" to a "right" and that a

discussion leader's responsibility is to encourage each student to develop and contribute a full voice.

The writer had conducted previous research that documented the need to empower student voice. Neilsen's piece (1991) is more philosophical than practical and merely reinforces the writer's convictions. However, particularly relevant to the writer's situation are Schaffer's (1989) practical strategies for developing individual voice. And Gillespie's (1991) memoir unit is especially appropriate for ninth graders, floundering in a sea of identity challenges.

Keeping a journal or a diary is a practice that seems unbounded by history or tradition. Recently educators have begun to discover a myriad of benefits that emerge from keeping a journal. Pinkston (1989) and Sullivan (1989) discuss the value of journal keeping to develop writing skills and to validate voice.

Pinkston (1989) recommends journal keeping as a tool to assist students in developing precise language, unique style and personal integrity. She uses Thoreau's work as a model and inspiration for her students.

Sullivan (1989) uses journals to demonstrate to students that "writing satisfies a basic human need for self-expression and self-exploration" (p. 55). She poses that journal writing is effective only when it allows for freedom of expression which will afford a student's full development of voice. When it is repeated over a long period of time, she feels it gives the student the feeling of power one has when "translating experience into language" (p. 55).

Journal writing is often introduced by English teachers and is, just as often, phased out or forgotten. Sullivan (1989) imposes a routine on this activity which would appear to improve its survival rate. Pinkston's (1989) Thoreau source is interesting but more suitable for American literature students.

In the Handbook for Planning an Effective Writing Program Honig (1989) outlines the basic principles needed to fuel a writing program designed to improve student achievement by providing the setting, tasks, and guidance to nurture meaningful, articulate student writing. In such a program students are provided with a wide variety of writing experiences that acknowledge and foster student interests, experience, and growth; students are encouraged to write without the fear of being ignored or invalidated. Based on a review of the literature, the handbook also describes specific strategies that enrich and improve student writing: implement writing as a process, integrate grammar instruction, provide sentence combining practice, consider the advantages of computer assisted writing instruction, devote more deliberate attention to the process, especially that of prewriting and reader response. Most importantly, the handbook challenges teachers to present writing as a powerful tool through which students can exercise control and fulfill their need for self expression.

Honig's (1989) handbook is well documented and specifically practical. All phases seemed relevant and feasible. However, integrating grammar instruction would challenge the writer to take a risk by developing instruction that would run contrary to the English curriculum and the department philosophy.

Kearns (1991) and Benson (1991) describe processes of evaluation that further invest students to their work and also provide them with additional learning experiences. Kearns proposes a system of self evaluation of writing. Students are asked to use 2.5 inch margins and respond in those margins to their work. Kearns suggests they comment on the following: problems/possible solutions, the process, techniques/special attempts, word selections, and responses to others' comments about their work. Based on the writer's

past attempts to elicit similar student response to writing, this practice is pregnant with possibilities. Benson describes tests that are designed to improve student writing by including essay questions that require documentation, creativity, and evaluation. The writer already employs a similar test design.

Spenser (1989) and Grusko (1990) describe activities that connect students to literature selections. Spenser complements the study of difficult works and ideas (such as alienation, chaos, and commitment) with the reading and discussion of young adult novels that deal with these themes in a more accessible format. Grusko focuses on bringing characters to life by assigning each student in a group to a different character from the work of literature. Through a series of activities, students understand the motivations, desires, and feelings of the character and prepare to answer questions posed by their peers, i.e. "Hester, why didn't you move away?" (The Scarlet Letter). The writer has been responsible for the department's purchase of numerous, such young adult novels.

Nelson (1991) describes a plan to enrich a mundane, trivial language to improve the students' ability to articulate ideas. First she teaches her students the power of "dynamic" (p. 18) silence. Secondly she encourages honesty in journal entries, "speaking from the heart" (p. 18) in a strong but simple style. In addition her plans include opportunities for publication of work, assignments that require short written pieces of high quality, and the development of genuine listeners who validate honest expression. Although the philosophical base of the author's argument is unique and perceptive, her solutions are presented elsewhere in the literature.

Atwell (1987) describes reading and writing workshops that improve student achievement. Atwell notes that reading

workshops are the center of her literature study. A reading workshop (set up as such within the regular classroom) begins with a mini lesson and is followed by independent reading during which time students may only do that--read. Students earn points for meeting expectations during independent reading time. Writing workshops function in a similar manner. Students are provided with utensils and a setting conducive to independent writing. Atwell teaches at the junior high level and focuses much of her planning on the development of healthy reading and writing attitudes and habits. However, by ninth grade the writer was expected to put these habits into more focused action.

The writer had considered other ideas that might positively impact student achievement in ninth grade English class. The writer could contact and meet students prior to the opening of school in the fall. The writer's classroom could be redesigned to better reflect the students' and the writers' interests and willingness to work as team members. Students could be involved in a letter exchange and be given opportunities to publish their work. Alternate, more relevant, literature selections could be considered by the writer. Finally, the use of computers could enhance many of the recommended activities.

Description of Selected Solution

The writer was prepared to implement numerous changes in teaching style, course content, and learning activities. She would establish communication lines with incoming ninth grade students by exchanging post cards with them, inviting them to attend an open house and to participate in and contribute to the decoration of the classroom before school began. The writer would redefine herself as a facilitator of learning

and develop appropriate group activities that focused on students as individuals who needed to feel fulfilled, important, and in control of learning they would view as meaningful. The writer would also choose alternate literature selections that would serve as better catalysts for student voice and as better models for student writing and mechanics instruction. The writer would design complementary writing activities that would better connect students to themselves, to literary characters, to their history, and to their creative potential to impact. The writer would teach writing as a process according to the most recent and well documented research and incorporate journal keeping and independent reading into the program.

The project would be effective for four reasons. The writer's belief in the unique value of each individual student and the need to nurture this uniqueness was genuine and energized. The writer had the necessary training, supplies, and setting to effectively implement the stated changes. The research supported the changes planned by the writer. Because of the writer's intention to focus more on the students than on the content, the writer would have the support of the students involved.

Report of Action to Be Taken

Procedures prior to implementation: This proposal was shared with the English department chairperson. The writer requested a list of the names, summer addresses, level recommendations, and English grades of the ninth grade students assigned to her English classes. In the planning stages this request was regarded as basic and straight forward. However, in reality it posed the first major obstacle. Thinking that he was granting favors by providing

the writer with class lists prior to the opening of school, the administrator was reluctant to give his permission. After numerous explanations the writer was granted this so named favor. By that time the computer operator had left on vacation. The most information the writer was able to ascertain from the substitute operator was the class list of names only. This left the writer with no addresses, level recommendations, or grades. With the help of a phone book and some local residents the writer was able to write only one third of the students and was unable to make any advanced decisions regarding group assignments. The writer ordered the necessary supplies for a writing workshop and a back up supply of journals. The writer was unable to meet with eighth grade English teachers in the district to determine what kinds of learning experiences these students had participated in. However, a meeting with the largest sending school's English department chair person shedded significant light on the project. The writer reviewed and chose appropriate literature selections. The writer developed one unit of study that met curriculum requirements and reflected solutions posed by the literature and the writer. The implementation of the memoir unit progressed as planned with few deviations except the omission of independent reading and a special social studies event designed to acquaint students with subjects of biographies and the coordination of health and English assignments. These were canceled only because the writer ran out of time. Also, instead of binding autobiographical work into a student book, the class proposed the painting of a mural that would breathe life into a sterile green cement wall and would leave a permanent, visible statement for future students desked in this classroom. Completing this project on schedule kept the writer under constant pressure. No time was wasted. The writer would recommend a more relaxed time line to include

the omitted activities and to schedule time for class reflection and catch up. The Memoir Unit referred to in this project is available for use by any interested teacher.

Implementation Schedule

1. Week 1: August 19 - 23, 1991 - Established pre - school opening communication with incoming ninth grade students.
   a. The writer sent post cards to each incoming student to personalize herself to them, to personalize their English class to them, and to encourage their response.
   b. The writer invited the students to contribute to the decoration of the classroom by sharing such personal items as their favorite posters and projects.
   c. The writer invited students to participate in the decoration of the classroom during an open house scheduled prior to the opening of school.
2. Week 2: August 29 - 30, 1991 - Pre - school opening activities.
   a. The teacher hosted an open house.
   b. Teachers and volunteer students decorated and organized the room in a pleasing and practical manner.
3. Week 3: September 3 - 6, 1991 - School orientation activities.
   a. The writer familiarized the students with school procedures, schedules, and building layout.
   b. Students participated in library, reading center, and computer room orientation activities.
   c. Students were given opportunities to articulate their anxiety, frustration, and confusion with the opening school events.

d. After listening to related student poetry read by upper-class students, ninth grade students were given the opportunity to examine, share, and express in writing the changes they had experienced when school began and summer ended and the roots of this seeming metamorphosis.

e. Students were encouraged to view their teacher and peers and classroom environment as genuinely supportive and concerned.

4. Week 4: September 9 - 13, 1991 - English class orientation activities.

a. The writer introduced the students to the role of journal keeping in the course by inviting teachers (including herself) and past students to share their journals and journal keeping experiences with the students and by requesting students to design and bring to class a personalized journal for the next class week.

b. Through a series of activities the writer introduced the students to writing as a process by walking them through the various stages of composing and culminating in a letter to be mailed to a friend in eighth grade that described the student's survival of the first week as a freshman in high school.

c. The writer introduced the students to their groups, the process of cooperative learning, and the role of group and individual goals through a series of non threatening group contests (based on information gleaned from school and class orientation activities and personal experience).

5. Week 5: September 16 - 20, 1991 - Establishing the peer climate.
   a. Each student developed an experience portfolio that included a silhouette growth profile.
   b. Following the guidelines of the library orientation, each student completed a roots search.
   c. Practicing presented library skills, groups completed a research hunt.
6. Weeks 6 - 9: September 23 - October 19, 1991
   Begin classroom routine - Unit: The Memoir.
   a. When appropriate, the following weekly plan was followed:
      Monday - Introduce and practice new vocabulary and mechanics lesson;
      Tuesday - Plan literature study that will serve as catalyst and model for writing and vocabulary and mechanics practice;
      Wednesday and Thursday - Continue with lessons introduced on Tuesday;
      Friday - Administer culminating literature and writing evaluation in varied formats designed by teachers and/ or students.
   b. Group work followed the experiential learning model.
   c. Journals recorded literature, pre-writing responses, and mechanics mastery in composition.
   d. Selections for the memoir unit represented numerous genres and cultures
   e. Students designed and created a mural that reflected both their individuality and their universal connection to other adolescents.
   f. Selections were enriched by supporting media representation.

g. The memoir unit was designed to challenge students to recognize and take charge of "shapers" in their lives.

7. Weeks 10 -13: October 21 - November 16, 1991 - The research project - culmination of paragraph development and memoir study.
   a. Students participated in group and individual activities designed to heighten awareness of and interest in noteworthy individuals.
   b. Students familiarized themselves with available biographies and autobiographies and chose one to read.
   c. From the basic source students searched and collected other sources of information about their subject.
   d. Following basic ninth grade instruction in the "pre research paper" process students completed a preliminary outline and bibliography and note cards.
   e. Because ninth grade students are not introduced to documentation or the composing of the final paper, students completed an alternate paper to describe theirsubject by using skills of description, narration, comparison, contrast, and explanation.
   f. Based on a group generated list of questions students dressed and played the role of their figure before an audience determined by class members.

8. Week 14: November 18 - 22, 1991 - Evaluation of the implementation period.
   a. Students completed freshman transition questionnaires.
   b. Students' first quarter grades were compared to their eighth grade level of achievement.

c. Attendance records were checked for the classes' average absence rate.
d. The writer considered journal entries regarding student discipline problems, parent conference tone and focus, student attitude toward tasks, and frequency and honesty of individual student participation.
e. The writer examined student work records for evidence of fully developed ideas, concern for quality, and improvement in specific skill areas addressed by the curriculum.
f. Students and teacher completed silhouettes and considered the growth they reflected.

CHAPTER V
RESULTS, DISCUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Results

Ninth grade students, entering high school from numerous sending schools ascribing to an array of instructional philosophies and structures, performed inconsistently. Placed on a graph these students' work habits would portray a rocky path of unpredictable and unprecedented hills and valleys. Their performance generally contradicted their achievement in eighth grade English class; their daily, weekly, and monthly responses to information and assignments in ninth grade English class struck the writer as mercurial, affected by elusive intangibles that insidiously invalidated the instructional plans of the writer.

1. The writer expected that when compared to their eighth grade scores (academic year 1990 - 1991), first quarter grade records of three ninth grade sections of English (academic year 1991 - 1992) would indicate that 68 of the 79 students enrolled in these sections would have improved or remained at the same level. The anticipated fall enrollment was considerably lower than expected. These three sections of freshman English settled into a total of 62 students which would dictate a modification of the expected outcome to read 53 of 62 students will maintain or improve their past performance level. Grade records of these 62 students indicate that 55 students maintained or improved their English grades.

2. The writer expected the student absence rate to drop below the school's quarterly average of 1.5 days. It did, in

fact, do this. Attendance records of these 62 students indicate an average absence rate of 1.1 days for the fall quarter 1991.

3. The writer expected a drop in discipline referrals for disruptive behavior of at least one third. No discipline referrals occurred during fall quarter 1991 in these three sections of English class.

4. The writer expected her journal entries to indicate positive student experiences communicated to her by parents. In actuality, the writer responded to four parent phone calls, all of which focused on writing assignments. Parents wanted to know more about the assignments because they were involved with their student's search for ideas. Attendance at open house was 75%, considerably higher than the 40% expected school wide. During this time parents communicated that they were generally aware of many topics and assignments because students had chosen to discuss them at home with parents and/or friends. The growth profiles on display for open house immediately connected parents, student, and teacher. Our common interest and concern was represented by these silhouettes.

5. The writer expected completed freshman questionnaires to indicate that a majority of these 62 freshmen felt fulfilled and supported by their experiences in English class as entering high school freshmen. Student questionnaire responses were fairly consistent. A majority of students reported that they were encouraged to develop confidence in themselves. In their answers they subsequently credited themselves, their strength and perseverance, as most responsible for their adjustment to the high school.

6. The writer expected her journal entries to reflect student involvement with the course work. The writer noted that many students tended to gather in her room before and after school as part of their daily routine. First period

students reported directly to the classroom instead of "hanging out" in the cafeteria. Many brought friends. However, the topic of discussion and activity generally focused on homework assignments. Students could be observed on a regular basis helping each other with school work or arguing over answers that differed.

During class students often held lively discussions, even about a seemingly mundane grammar task. From such dialogue came much more understanding than from a traditional rote review of the lesson or homework. Students also indicated their assumption that all students were interested by regularly offering to take hand outs for absent students and calling them with assignment information. Most group members knew each others' phone numbers because their interest in the class had traveled outside the classroom. When students ignored one another during discussions, it was more often than not another student who reminded the offender that she wished to hear instead of the traditional teacher as disciplinarian.

To literature content students responded personally, frequently bursting with testimony of their understanding of a figure's feelings based on the personal connection they felt with the character despite often foreign settings and experiences. When the writer tried to abbreviate the study of two selections, she was scolded by the group who had heard from others that the pieces were too good to miss. In addition, one group of students requested that the unit be extended to include an enrichment activity they themselves designed.

In summary, students saw this classroom as their own setting where meaningful learning and exchange took place. It had become a place to be by choice, not mandate.

7. The writer expected that by examining the number and quality of completed assignments during the last two weeks of

the first quarter compared to the first two weeks she would note some degree of improvement in both quality of work and responsibility demonstrated by each student. The records were set up to specifically reflect completion of assignment, timely submission, and quality of work on a scale of "yes," "sort of," and "no." The records indicated that no student missed a major assignment after the fourth week of the quarter (five weeks prior to the quarter's end) compared to seven students who missed major assignments during the initial two weeks of the quarter. Tardy work was not a factor because students respected my policy of turning work in late only when a written, signed, legitimate excuse accompanied it. An evaluation of student work showed no student sliding backwards and only 5 of 62 remaining unchanged. However, during the last week of the quarter, students were frequently without necessary materials, rushed, and disorganized - grasping frantically to regain control as they felt the pressure of a school - wide effort to end the quarter with extensive evaluation activities and imposing make up deadlines.

Discussion

The writer has determined that expected outcomes were reached. Students did improve their level of academic achievement in the ninth grade English class by meeting deadlines, attending class regularly, arriving to class prepared, and participating in class activities in a meaningful and attentive manner. Records (grade, attendance, and journal) indicate that students did, in fact, demonstrate these responsible habits that effected an improvement in their skills and subsequently their average.

However, it behooves the teacher to ascertain what, in particular, effected this improvement in achievement.

The initial focus of the writer on the transitional needs of entering ninth grade students positively affected their sense of well being during the first few days of school. Students felt welcomed and supported during the rough days of orientation to a new school system. MacIver (1989) reports that two percent of the students who will become high school drop out statistics may be saved by high school programs that address the transitional needs of ninth grade students. Rosa and Vowels (1988) document the value of "believable informants" (p. 58) and open lines of communication in assisting ninth grade students in transition. Students in this project engaged in a letter exchange with eighth grade students and in a poetry sharing session where they heard from older students about their initial high school experiences. Students were also invited to visit the classroom ahead of school's opening, personalize the room so that it represented themselves, not just the teacher, and in a journal exchange to converse with older students about their school- related insecurities. In their study report (1990) of ninth grade students predisposed to fail, Sansone and Baker note the positive impact of effective orientation, solid relationships between teacher and individual students, and a personal school environment. Within the scope of her role as teacher, the writer gave priority to these concerns in her dealings with students and lesson planning.

The content and implementation of the curriculum designed for this project reflected the physical,cognitive, and personality developmental needs of these ninth grade students. Physically these adolescents were coping with the onset of reproductive maturity, its moral and physical

implications, and an oftentimes disproportionate body that appeared in the mirror as an alien image. According to Piaget (Phillips, 1969) adolescents begin to reason abstractly, but they have difficulty coordinating abstractions. One of the obstacles preventing them from doing so is egocentrism. However, their egocentrism differs from that of infants who focus on physical needs. These teenagers, instead, are preoccupied, to the degree of distorting reality, with their changing bodies. Consequently, they illogically assume that the world is seen by others through their adolescent eyes. This often leads to an idealistic world view in which young adults believe they will change the world, not themselves. And so these young people thrive on opportunities to creatively hypothesize. However, they must be encouraged to take the point of view of another when doing so. According to Erikson (1980) adolescents are also in the midst of determining and defining their identity, one that connects past experiences with future expectations.

Learning activities were planned that encouraged students to role play and speak before the group to become more comfortable with their bodies. Cognitively students were not expected to make unreasonable leaps but were instead assisted and encouraged to consider factors that connected otherwise divergent material. Because material was often foreign in its setting and cultural tradition, students were challenged to take the point of view of another and to relate it to their own. This type of activity challenged students to reason with abstractions. Literature and media selections dealt with the struggle of transition, development of identity, and the validation of voice in culturally divergent settings. However, themes were convergent, personally familiar, and relevant to students who grew to understand their individual membership in the human condition.

The format of instruction followed Kolb's experiential learning model (Svinicki & Dixon,1987). Student activities

followed the four stages of Kolb's cycle which is rooted in Dewey, Lewing and Piaget (Svinicki & Dixon,1987). First the students engaged with the material on a personal level rooted in concrete reality. Next they were guided to reflect on the experience by assuming different perspectives. From this study the students arrived at a conclusion which they put into practice and finally applied to new concrete experiences. In other words students had integrated the information, which had become part of their working knowledge because they had been given the opportunity to engage with the material in a concrete and personal format, internalized it, and applied it later.

School became more meaningful and emotionally healthy for these students. They invested more of themselves in the material; they took ideas out of the classroom to share with peers, parents, and other teachers. Parents were pleased to note that they were no longer viewed as "nags." Instead they assumed the more positive roles of helpers and contributors. Parents then strengthened the school community by becoming part of it.

An unexpected offshoot of a more relevant, student - centered program was a change in attitude about grades. In her previous teaching experiences the writer had struggled to deemphasize grades and to focus on the value of broader understanding. Her efforts were usually unrewarded and often alienated her from students and parents. However, the real issue now seems apparent. In prior years students and parents were connected to school merely by grades because the information gleaned from their school experience seemed isolated to the school building, disengaged from the lives of students and parents. However, grades mailed home and used to measure success or failure clearly impacted the home environment in a real way. Now the information itself held equal value, and students shifted their focus from the

product to the process. The writer felt most satisfied by this unexpected turn of events.

Because students felt more personally involved in material that addressed their peculiar adolescent needs, they were not as easily distracted. Serious discipline issues did not surface. Instead, manners needed polishing. Students requested polite respectful behavior from each other and reminded one another of each student's responsibility to the group. The teacher found herself enforcing mannerly conduct only when she was lecturing and then not very often. In group discussions the responsibility for orderly, respectful conduct was monitored by class members.

Finally, the redefinition of teacher as facilitator and of student as both teacher and learner in a cooperative setting where learners felt more in control and as a result more responsible for their learning encouraged students to do their best. Glasser (1986) emphasizes the adolescent need for control. He delineates the levels of control to include: the feeling that respected individuals listen; say, "You're right;" and occasionally acknowledge that the students' ideas are better. In summary Glasser reminds teachers that "The ultimate use of power should be to empower others." (p. 45).

These students who felt empowered by the procedures, leadership, and curriculum content recognized school as a satisfying and meaningful experience. Attendance improved and student achievement improved. Students who regularly participate in an academic program of study obviously benefit more than those whose participation is sporadic and distracted.

But more important to the writer than these tangible factors is the shift in focus observed by her. In the past the writer as teacher subscribed to the notion of conformity, a class performed best when it functioned as a team

concentrating on a common goal. From the first day of school when the writer asked for the completion of what she viewed as a simple task -- the naming of each group, the shift was initially fueled and remained energized by a curriculum that validated and nurtured individual voice and personal goal attainment and by a committed student body. As each group struggled to agree on a name for itself that would reflect its individual composition and group identity, members became sensitive to and respectful of each other's racial, religious, sexual, and moral beliefs. Students and teacher discovered satisfaction and delight in this celebration of self and would not tolerate a reversion to homogeneity, for the richness of individual regard, contribution, and validation was too valuable to sacrifice. Hence, the class adopted a tone of respect and tolerance which complemented their subsequent academic efforts, both individual and group.

Neilson (1991) reminds teachers that because we are social beings we learn best when socializing which the author equates to engaging in dialogue. She notes that the richness, its diversity and honesty, determines the level and quality of learning and understanding that evolves. Dialogue will not venture beyond the superficial script that mimics the evaluator's mind set unless the group believes that knowledge is what Neilson (1991) calls "person - specific, embedded in the context of individual lives"(p. 496). Opportunities to exchange ideas within the context and safety of the small peer group provided students with a setting conducive to the honesty required in study that requires critical and responsible thinking.

Maltese (1991) confirms that peers speaking before peers (in their cooperative learning groups) results in more honest and healthy responses, as opposed to pat answers that satisfy the teacher's lesson planning. However, it is important that the facilitator anticipate possible tangents and develop a

sense of spontaneity in dealing with them effectively so that they serve the student's personal and academic needs.

Participation in a group is further supported by Arendt (1958) who explains that students must be allowed the space to declare to their peers that they not only occupy a space in the community but are affiliated with it. Small group discussions allow for students to make such a public declaration within the context of the classroom setting. Therefore, both small and large victories, simple and lofty goals, must be regarded and acknowledged as equally valid by group members, including the teacher.

The group focus of lesson planning revealed yet another facet of the group process. When groups found themselves by design of an activity pitted against one another to determine winners and losers, the process was counter productive, briefly destroying the prevailing sense of cooperation that had positively effected an improvement in study habits and skills. Recognizing that rewards are still effective motivators, the writer restructured these activities so that all participants were to differing degrees winners. A group's score climbed without relevance to another group's performance, and cooperation returned as the most effective tool.

In summary, the writer acknowledges that her commitment to teacher as facilitator of a cooperative group of individuals is most responsible for the success of the program. Slavin (1987) documents the positive academic impact of cooperative learning. In particular he cites 38 studies of at least 4 weeks' duration employing a cooperative learning philosophy. Of these 38 programs 33 reported a measurable improvement in student performance. He further notes that cooperative learning has positively impacted instructional programs in urban, suburban, and rural areas in grades 2-12 in countries as different as Israel, Nigeria, and

Canada and in disciplines as diverse as elementary mathematics and creative writing.

Recommendations

1. The teacher should commit to the group process before school begins. Subsequently students will be met by grouped desks and activities that communicate and solidify the teacher's commitment.
2. The teacher should promise herself that breaking up groups will not be a solution to other problems. When the temptation to say, "That's it! Tomorrow the rows return.", the teacher needs to step back, gather feedback, and search for the real issues causing the malfunction of the group process.
3. Keeping a journal is essential to remind and sensitize the teacher to the subtleties that occur as a result of group dynamics and to use for self validation and problem solving.
4. The teacher must relinquish all past affiliation with the lecturer who disseminates information to passive, obedient children who absorb isolated knowledge to parrot back to the teacher for evaluation.
5. Informally sharing teaching experiences served as a catalyst for furthering this solution within the teacher's assigned classes, the department, and district. Hearing oneself affirm the success of a program to colleagues serves to validate and inspire her to proceed to adopt these changes in all classes. Other teachers become interested in what is actually entailed and soon the teacher is asked to share her experiences in meetings and workshops.

Dissemination

This program was presented during workshop day to district teachers of ninth grade English. The writer has also been asked to share her findings with the entire English department. In addition, two articles are in preliminary stages of preparation. One discusses the importance of desk arrangement in fostering student responsibility and engagement. The second is co-authored with an early childhood colleague. This article focuses on the need for secondary teacher training to include developmental awareness and attention to it in developing and facilitating curriculum.

References

Arendt, H. (1958). The human condition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Atwell, N. (1987). In the middle: Writing, reading, and learning with adolescents. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton.

Barth, R. (1990). My personal vision of a good school. Phi Delta Kappan, 71 (6), 426-434.

Benson, B. (1991). Effective tests: Let them write! English Journal, 80 (2), 74-79.

Copeland, J., & Lomax, E. (1988). Building effective student writing groups. In J. Golub (Ed.), Focus on Collaborative Learning (pp. 99 - 104). Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

Easley, R. (1988). Cooperative learning in the literature classroom. In J. Golub (Ed.), Focus on Collaborative Learning (pp. 49 - 54). Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

Erikson, E.H. (1980). Identity and the life cycle. New York: W.W. Norton & Co.

Gillespie, J. (1991). The life of a seventh grader: Writing a memoir. English Journal, 80 (2), 48 - 51.

Glasser, W. (1986). Control theory in the classroom. New York: Harper & Row.

Grusko R.A. (1990). Engaging students with literature. In P. Phelan (Ed.), Literature and Life (pp. 109 - 112). Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

Honig, B. (1989). Handbook for Planning an Effective Writing Program. California State Department of Education.

Kolb, D. (1984). Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Kearns, J. (1991). The player's vision: Students writing about their writing as writing. English Journal, 80 (2), 62 - 66.

MacIver, D. J. (1990). Meeting the needs of young adolescents: Advisory groups, interdisciplinary teaching teams, and transition programs. Phi Delta Kappan, 71 (6), 458-464.

Maltese, R. (1991). Three philosophical pillars that support collaborative learning. English Journal, 80 (5), 20 - 23.

Moberg, G. (1989). Analyzing literature through collaborative speaking. In P. Phelan (Ed.), Talking to Learn (pp. 27 - 30). Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

Neilsen, L. (1991). Is anyone listening? The Reading Teacher, 44 (7),494 - 496.

Nelson, L. (1991). Bringing language back to life: responding to the new literacy. English Journal, 80 (2), 16 - 20.

Phillips, John L. (1969). The origins of intellect: Piaget's theory. San Francisco: WH Freeman.

Pinkston, J. (1989). Thoreau and current trends in the teaching of writing. English Journal, 85 (8), 50 - 52.

Rosa, A., & Vowels, M. (1988). Helping 8th graders make a "smooth move." Educational Leadership, 45 (6), 58 - 59.

Sansone, J., & Baker, J. (1990). Ninth grade for students at risk for dropping out of high school. The High School Journal, 94 (1), 218-231.

Schaffer, J. (1989). Improving discussion questions: Is anyone out there listening? English Journal, 78 (4), 40-42.

Slavin, R.E. (1987). Cooperative learning and the cooperative school. Educational Leadership, 45 (3), 7-13.

Spencer, P. (1989). YA novels in the AP classroom: Crutcher meets Camus. English Journal, 85 (8), 44 - 46.

Sullivan, A. (1989). Liberating the urge to write: From classroom journals to lifelong writing. English Journal, 85 (8), 55 - 61.

Svinicki, M., & Dixon, N. (1987). The Kolb model modified for classroom activities. College Teaching, 35 (4), 141 - 146.

APPENDIX A

FRESHMAN ADJUSTMENT QUESTIONNAIRE

Dear Students:

I am working on a project that will help ninth grade students in my English classes make a smoother, more positive adjustment to this high school. I would appreciate your honest response. Please do not include your name; just jot down whatever comes to your mind regarding the questions I ask. Thank you for helping me.

1. Please describe how you felt during the first quarter of ninth grade.

2. What, do you suppose, caused you to feel this way? Remember to consider teachers' expectations, parents' expectations, your expectations, peers, the building, your schedule, your extra activities, and the rules.

3. What is most responsible for your adjustment to ninth grade?